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Extraordinary People in Search of Ordinary Lives

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# On the Outside

A look at two decades of deinstitutionalization in  
West Virginia through the eyes of people  
with developmental disabilities.

**Julie Pratt, Editor**



group of us. I guess they didn't want anything to rock the boat. Maybe with five of us, the potential was there for us to cause problems.

To my knowledge, I was the only kid in that place who had a normal I.Q. Everything I saw was in terms of people with mental retardation. To me, that was the norm.

I had physical therapy from the time I was put there, until I was nine. Betty Poynter was my P.T. Betty took a liking to me from the beginning. Betty became pissed off when I kept failing the psychological evaluations that the center gave me. She knew I was normal... you know, smart!

Betty

figured it out. The criteria that the psychologists were using were pictures of things that would be found in a normal home environment. Not the things that I would be exposed to as a resident of the Center.

When Betty realized that I didn't even know what a birthday cake was, she decided that for my next birthday; either fourth or fifth, I can't remember, she would have that many cakes for me.

I was the first resident to ever get put in the collages. When I was ten years old, I was put in Promise Cottage. It was one in a group of five cottages. When I was there, it was the same as living on the ward, but different. Different in the respect that there were different rules — but equally regulated, if not more so. It was designed primarily as a place to train the residents in more of a home environment.

My life up there was weird, because they were trying to teach me how to do things. For example, I had to learn how to sweep a carpet, wash dishes, sweep floors — utility

# Trying to Put the Past Behind Mickey Finn

*Disappointment has followed Mickey Finn for most of his life. At 34, he's trying to put the past behind him — the ten years in an institution, the eight unhappy years in foster care, and a two-year stint at Fairmont State College followed by unemployment. For several years, he had to live in an apartment building for elderly people because it was the only accessible place he could find.*

*Now Mickey attends West Virginia University in Morgantown. He lives in a student apartment near the campus and downtown. He hopes his knack for computers will lead to a Bachelor's degree in computer science. (Interview by Beth Weegar)*

I lived at Colin Anderson Center from the time I was 18 months old until the time I was 12. One of my earliest memories was being held by a woman named Madril Caine, It's more like a feeling than a memory, Not necessarily anything comforting, but then again she wasn't abandoning the kid either. More like the way a mother would hold a child on her hip. Have you ever wondered what it would be like to raise a kid without giving it any love at all? Don't hold the kid, don't praise him in any way. Have you ever wondered what that would be like? That's exactly how I was raised. I don't ever remember being held, except by Madril Caine. And she didn't do that very often because she would always get scolded for playing favorites- There was a group of five of *us* that were like Our Gang. I'd say that me and Mary would most likely be the ring leaders. She was a spina bifida, hydro cephalic, somewhat mentally retarded girl. She was in a wheelchair. Some people say that- she was severely retarded, but I never believed that *I* believe- she was retarded. But the way she reacted to me told me she had a higher intelligence than they were giving her credit for We got separated when I was about seven or eight, the

wondered what it would be like to raise a kid without giving it any love - at all?

center. I was in one of the cottages at the time. On this particular day, about halfway through the *day*, they had me put on my good clothes. What that consisted of was a shirt and pants that hadn't been faded yet or that didn't have any holes in it or nothing- They told me to go to the playroom, I went to the door and there were three people sitting oh, maybe five to ten feet away from me, I was just standing there, and they all came up to me. And they picked me up and hugged me and all that stuff. I don't know them from Adam. You know, no one told me anything.

Well, from that point on, things didn't go well. Over the next six to nine months, my mother didn't pay hardly any attention to me at all. The only person that did take care of me was my sister, Kim. For all intents and purposes, she was my mother, and I was her son. I mean she literally took care of me. She was 12 years old.

Eventually, my mom took me back to the Center, She told them she would kill me if they didn't take me back, I ain't kidding. I believe she would have done *it*, too. My mother's state of mind and my stepfather's dominance over her, both factors put together made her a real dangerous person,

I really flipped out when my mother took me back. Two weeks later, I cracked up. The idea that my mother rejected me was enough to send me over the edge. They say I cracked up for two weeks. Every day for about three weeks after that, I cried. I was trying to *get* to the point where I could come to terms with my life as a whole and the way I was raised. To this day, I need people's approval I need them to care about me. More often than not, I don't get it. I desperately want to be loved by somebody.

I have very little relationship with any of my family members now. My mother, I haven't seen since the day I graduated from high school. My father, I have only seen one time in my entire life for 20 minutes. As for my stepsister, she is living in Virginia, and I talk to her about once a month. She's the only one out of the entire bunch that ever gave a damn whether I lived or died.

There was a guy who worked at the Center, his name was Carl. He saw me over in the crib ward, and I guess he fell in love with me. Over the years after that, him and his wife would take me home periodically. They took me to

everybody else's. Two weeks later, I worked up enough nerve to introduce myself to her, and we *became* friends. For the next three or four months, she paid attention to me as a friend, and that was enough to give me something to live for. Just that little taste of affection, to me that was the sweetest thing I'd ever had.



When I was 24, I went to *college* at Fairmont State. I attended for two and a half years. Towards my last year, my grades were going downhill fast. I wasn't feeling good. My body was beginning to phase out on me. I didn't have what I needed. D.R.S. (Division of *Rehabilitation Services*) was not "being any help at all. I needed my own personal computer. But they wouldn't buy me one- God forbid a computer science major should need a computer!

I wanted to be out of West Virginia so badly. I wanted to leave my past behind, I couldn't get away from it. I had two and a half years of college education, I knew more about PC's than most people could dream up. But yet I couldn't get a job,

I was forced to live in a high rise for elderly people, because there was nowhere else for me to be. There was one person younger than me. This building was 99-9% elderly. I didn't want to be there anyway, but the building I was living in was being sold. It was the only place I could afford. But at the same time, it was like putting me back in *Colin*. Before, I was living by the college, and whenever I wanted I could go get pizza, I could go talk to friends, people were mostly my age. Here, this was like a graveyard. It felt like the people were waiting to die.

I moved from Fairmont to Morgantown, to a place

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called Unity Manor in October of 1995. Thanks to Julia, who was my CCIL worker when I was living in Fairmont, I was able to get the apartment. The people in that building were more outgoing, but still nibby. They had to know what everybody was doing, I basically kept to myself. I kind of prefer to be that way. Like I said about Fairmont, I don't like that type of building. But there was not a lot of choice, It was right downtown, an ideal location as far as being able to get around. But I hated the building.

In January of 1996, I started attending WVU This semester I was able to move into a student apartment.

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Teresa is my attendant who comes five days a week. Before she started working with me, I would get a new attendant, they would work a time or two and they'd start making excuses or not showing up,

I am working on a Bachelor's in Computer Science. Last semester, I took on the University for lack of accommodations. They didn't provide me with "note-takers." After a long fight, WVU finally agreed to provide me with note-takers. If they believe that I've done well

as a result of that, note-takers will be made available to all students with disabilities who need them as of January, 1998,

I'm in the process of suing the cab company for leaving me stranded at the mall, I took the cab (with my wheelchair) there, no problem. But when I called the same company to get a ride home, the driver refused to transport my chair, And they're the only cab company in town!

Since I was little, I was always told to tolerate anything. By the time I was ten years old, you could basically hit me in the face with a ball bat, and I wouldn't do anything about it. I would just stand there and take it. I had no real intuition or inclination to do anything about it, because I always thought the punishment would be worse than what I was experiencing.

From the time I was about ten until I was about 20 years old, I didn't give a shit if I lived or died. If somebody said here's a gun, put it to your head and pull the trigger, nine times out of ten, I probably would have, I didn't care.

When I was little, I had been passed around so much that I was. just totally shut down.

I quit having dreams. When I Was growing up, I had many dreams, but the older I got the more disenchanted I became, because it became too hard to handle it I cared too much. It seemed like the more I cared, the worse the pain would be. In order to protect myself, I had to give them up.

What I want is to be considered as being normal. That means having a job, a wife, maybe a couple of kids. Yeah, the whole nine yards. But most importantly, I just want to be able to grow old a happy man knowing that I've left my mark on the world, However, I don't think I'm any closer to reaching those goals right now.

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